Long Island Native Grass Initiative

Bridging the Gap… Going to Seed…

Long Island is a diverse mosaic of maritime grasslands, pitch pine, oak and beech forests, rivers, streams, tidal marshes, bluffs, and beaches that are fragmented by towns, roads, and development. As is the trend across the country, a decline in biodiversity continues to be witnessed as these natural habitats are further encroached upon by agriculture, development, and invasive species. In the fields of Restoration Ecology and Conservation Biology, conserving such biodiversity has long been focused at the habitat, population, and species levels. Recently, the importance of protecting biodiversity at a genetic level has gained recognition and momentum as the implications of the loss of biodiversity within native plant populations and communities are understood.

The use of local, genetically native "ecotyped" plant material in landscaping and restoration activities is now being encouraged in order to help preserve the genetic heritage of native plant species and thereby, biodiversity on a molecular level. Environmental organizations, the general public, and governmental agencies are responding positively to this concept, by increasingly advocating for the use of such plant material, thereby instigating a demand for such plant materials. Unfortunately the application of ecotypic native plants in restorations and landscaping activities has been stifled due to the lack of native plant source material needed to create a commercially available product.

The Long Island Native Grass Initiative (LINGI), is a cooperative effort of over 30 non-profit organizations, governmental agencies, and nursery professionals whose goal is to "bridge this gap" between supply and demand, by providing initial sources of native plant materials to further commercial native plant propagation activities. Since 2005, LINGI's volunteers have conducted field collections, seed cleaning, and applied standard plant propagation techniques towards the creation of founder seed for Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans),* Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium),* Big Bluestem *(Andropogon gerardii),* and Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*). LINGI's efforts are intentionally focused on harvesting in a genetically and ecologically sensitive manner, in order to capture as much genetic variability within these populations as possible, while minimizing impact to ecological processes (seed bank, forage, predation, nesting, etc.).

The first full harvest of the *S. nutans, S. scoparium, A. gerardii,* and *P. virg*atum founder plots was achieved in fall of 2008, with the resulting seed provided to Ernst Conservation Seed (ECS) for commercial increase and sale. Come 2011, the first LINGI Ecotyped - Source Identified Certified seed for each of these species will be commercially available, through ECS, marking a great milestone for LINGI.

With increasing nursery interest, high public demand, and constant requests for additional plant materials, LINGI's momentum is rapidly expanding. Through annual plant sales, diversification of targeted plant materials, contract growing, and grant writing, LINGI will continue to successfully serve as the mechanism to identify and collect plant materials from the wildlands of Long Island for commercial plant production. As such, the preservation of the genetic heritage of Long Island's native plant populations and thereby, biodiversity at a molecular level, will continue to go to seed!

LINGI will be holding its second annual benefit, a ***Native Plant Sale***, in the spring of 2010 to support their continued efforts! This effort thrives solely on the concept of pooling resources and volunteer support. If you are interested becoming a volunteer, are interested in purchasing plants, or would like further information, please contact Polly Weigand, LINGI Coordinator, at (631) 727-2315x3, email at **Polly.Weigand@suffolkcountyny.gov** or check out the LINGI website at: **http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/parks_divisions/gnpc/lingi.html**